

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**THE WORKING PEOPLE OF LOWELL
LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
MARY BLEWETT/MARTHA MAYO**

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INTERVIEWER: SYLVIA CONTOVER
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**S = SYLVIA
I = IRENE**

Tape 85.33

S: ... of Irene Desmarais. I'm interviewing her. She lives at 409 Pawtucket Street. And this is "Growing Up in Lowell, Massachusetts", which is Mill City. Irene, why don't we start in with you now. Let's talk about your grandparents first.

I: My grandparents?

S: Yah, where did they come from?

I: On my father's side they come from a place in Canada called St. Francois du Lac. My grandmother's name was Plamondon, and my grandfather's name was Gustave Henri Desmarais.

S: What did they do in Canada?

I: I believe they were farmers.

S: Did they come to the United States?

I: They came to the United States and settled in Manchester, New Hampshire. That's where my father was born, in Manchester. My mother's parents came from St. Jean de Belville, outside of Montreal. They were store, they owned a store, a variety store and they came to the United States and settled in Lowell. My father and mother, well my grandparents you want to know about.

S: Well did they come to Lowell with your grandparents?

I: Well they come to Lowell about the same time, but they didn't know each other at the time. (S: Yes) My grandparents on my father's side had five children. And I really don't know what they did besides that.

S: When they came to Manchester, they came to work in the mill there?

I: They must have. (S: Umhm) They must have. But then they returned to Canada and they lived in Canada till my father was fourteen years old.

S: Oh, so he grew up in Canada?

I: He grew up about fourteen years in Canada, and then he came back to Lowell, to Manchester. And (--)

S: Where did he meet your mother?

I: He met my mother at (--) My grandmother used to send him to do, buy some dry goods, dry goods at the Chalifoux Store, or Pelletier Ledoux store where she worked.

S: Here in Lowell.

I: Here in Lowell. She was a buyer. My mother's name was Regina Barry. She was one of eleven children. And she, first was only fourteen when she came to Lowell. She did start to work in the mills, but that was a very, very short tenure, because she wanted to work in the stores. So she went to work at Gilbrides. She was a glove fitter. And she worked at Pelletier Ledoux, and then she worked at Chalifoux.

S: Now Chalifoux a French name?

I: Yes.

S: Do you know who built that building? That's [unclear].

I: It was Harold Chalifoux.

S: Or he was (--)

I: She was hired by Mr. Chalifoux himself. (S: Oh) And after he hired her he went on a trip to New York and he died. (S: I see) So it turned out that she was working (--)

S: About what year was that? Do you have any idea?

I: It would have been 1912, or 13 because it was before she was married. (S: I see) And (--)

S: Now she spoke English at that time?

I: She spoke English at that time and (--)

S: Did she have an education? Is that why she wanted to work in the stores rather than the mills?

I: No. It's because she did not want to work in the mills. And my aunt Lena Barry, now her full name is Eleanor Barry, was a milliner on Merrimack Street. It was one of the best known millinery stores on the street.

S: Because in those days people wore hats. Women wore hats.

I: That's right. They wore hats. And not only did they wear hats, they made the hats, see. (S: Yes) So my aunt made the, had been (--) Well all right, let's go back a little bit. When my grandparents on the Barry side were still in Canada, Eleanor came an apprenticeship to, in Lowell and she went to work for this lady who owned the store on Merrimack Street. (S: I see) If the name comes back to me I'll give it to you later, but right now I don't remember it. And she worked there. So that she had a good knowledge of the different stores and opportunities that existed in Lowell. So as soon as my mother was established enough, she went, she found her a job. And in those days they worked 18 hours a day almost. I mean they, well I wouldn't say 18, but a good twelve hours. They'd work, maybe seven hours, or eight in the mill and then they'd go to work at night in the store. They'd work, you know. So anyways, she got her apprenticeship in working in the stores. (S: Um hm) And she worked at Pelletier Ledoux, which was a French store. Used to be located at the corner of Palmer and Merrimack Streets. She, she had what they called a following. All the French people of Canadian French descent, more or less, went to her for advice you know. So she'd go. She had (--) So when she went to Chalifoux, the following followed her. And that's where, coming back to your first question, that's how she met my father. Because my grandmother Desmarais used to send my father to do some errands for her. And he'd go to see, of course, Miss Barry, and they'd talk. They actually started going out together on a Tuesday night.

In those days St. Jean Baptiste Parish had a holy hour on Tuesday night. And my father had a very beautiful voice, and they used to sing during those hours of devotion. And my mother went to the holy hour and she noticed him. She had met him before, informally at the store. So she got into the pew with him, and when they came out of church he asked her to go for a walk. And that's how it started. They were married in 1914 and then went to live in Chelsea. Um, my father was a Stationary Engineer. And I believe in that time he worked for a man by the name of Lipchitz. And he used to operate a crane. Um, they lived in Chelsea, they had one child. Um, he died two, four days after he was born. The following year I was born, and that's 1916.

S: You were born in? (I: In Chelsea) Chelsea.

I: And then, I was born in August, and I guess they told me that in October sometime they came back to live in this house, in this very apartment where I'm living now.

S: That's very interesting.

I: And ah, yah, I think so.

S: Umhm.

I: So they lived here and (--)

S: Did they have more children?

I: They had um, they had one more daughter. I don't know whether my mother lost any in between there, I don't remember. But I do know I do have one sister, she's three and a half years younger than I am. (S: Uhm) And she's living in Lowell. She's married. She has six children, had six children, she lost one. One died about three years ago. And ah, so we were brought up right here on this street,

S: Now isn't it unusual to have a small family? Just two children? In most French families have large families?

I: It would have been [Laughs] (--) It would have been unusual except for the fact that my mother was 38 when she married and my father was 36. (S: I see) And she often said that if she had married twenty years younger, there would have been twenty. [Laughs] But at that point in the game they were lucky to have the three they did have.

S: Right. What did your father do in Lowell?

I: My father worked for the Saco-Lowell Shops in Lowell, until they decided to move to Maine. I think they closed around 1925, or something like that. And then he was out of work. But he, because of his, he was a machinist besides being an engineer. So because of that he was able to find work. So he went to work, back to work in Boston, and he came home weekends. (S: I see) At that time my mother didn't, my mother never went back to work, except during that one period when he was out of work. She worked Saturdays at my aunt's store, you know, because she could make hats too. So she (--)

S: Did they ever talk about any difficulties they had in adjusting in Lowell, because it was not Canada for instance? Or did they feel right at home?

I: They felt right at home. My father spoke English with an English accent. Now how come he had learned it that way I don't know. But, and he was very cosmopolitan in his views. He worked with all races and religions, and he was very opened I guess about everything. So that he had no difficulty. And everything, the same thing existed for my mother.

S: Now did your mother, your mother spoke English because she (--)

I: Yah she spoke English. And of course with my father, I won't say coach her, but to help her along afterwards they, she spoke a very good English, my mother. (S: Umhm) And, but as children, French was the only language spoken in the home as far as we were concerned. But they started to switch to English when we started, you know, when children got about 3 or 4 years old they repeat things out of context. So they would carry on conversations in English, and that's how we learned English.

S: I see. Did you know English when you went into the first grade in School?

I: Yes.

S: Where did you go to school?

I: Um, well I was a little unlucky there. I went to St. Joseph's Convent here in Lowell. It was on Moody Street. And my first two years of school were not completed, because I was sick. But I did complete my third grade without any absenteeism. And yes, I did speak a little English then. Well I think I must have spoken good enough English then, because when, in 1926 we moved from Lowell to Hudson, New Hampshire, where my father became the Engineer at the Presentation of Mary Academy. Um, the course there was strictly bilingual. Four hours of French, four hours of English. So that in order so not to make me lose a grade, they put me as a boarder that first year until the house that we were supposed to occupy was being renovated. Um they um (--) My mother asked, told the nuns that she would like me to be placed in the fourth grade, because that's where I belonged. So they gave me a test and they did put me in the fourth grade. But that year the fourth grade and the fifth grade were being conducted together. So at the end of the year I went into the sixth grade. So evidently my English must have been good enough to warrant a promotion, (S: Hm) you know?

S: Did you come back to Lowell to go to school? At any point?

I: No, I didn't. We were in Hudson from 1926 to 1935. I graduated from high school in 1934. I had went on to, at that time, Riviere College was located in Hudson. So I did my first semester (S: Uhm) over there. And then the following year my father decided to get away, changed his occupation and we moved to Nashua for about six months. And the odd part about it was, while my parents were in Nashua, I found a job in Lowell. So I came to work in Lowell. And I (--)

S: Where did you work in?

I: I worked in the Spinard Club Plan. They were located at I think it was 45 Bridge Street.

S: What did you do there?

I: I was a clerk. (S: Umhm) I was a clerk and a secretary and (--)

S: What did they do?

I: They, it was a mail-order house very much on the manner of Spiegals, you know? (S: Uhm) They had merchants. They had demonstrators that would take a big suitcase full of all kinds of things and they sold wearing apparels, towels, all kinds of things, mostly wearing apparel though. And they went into the outlying districts, like Winchendon for instance. And, they, the people would form a club. And they would have a demonstration of all those goods. And then they would take, the salesmen would take orders, bring them back to the store and we would put them up. At that point, well I would be a clerk. I mean, I would work with the other clerks in the store to put up the orders and then those orders were mailed to the, oh, they don't call them the chairman. The host. Anyway, the host person, was giving the party and she would distribute them to different members.

S: Now was that headed by a person that (--) Was that company owned by a French person?

I: Yes, definitely. His name was Rosaire Spinard. (S: Umhm) And his wife was a Grimard. I forget her first name, but her name was Grimard. Now the Spinard, I guess he had started that business. Mrs. Spinard's family were, she came from a family, her brothers were, they worked with mortar, they built walls and things like that, (S: Ah huh) cement workers. But she and he conducted the business. They started it in a very small way and it just grew. It was a very successful business. They had, at the time that I worked there, there were four girls in the office and there must have been as many out on the floor.

S: And were all the employees French?

I: Oh. Definitely. Not only that, but oh this is funny. I guess I didn't recognize it really as prejudice in those days, but it was all family. And when I reached a certain salary they decided they didn't want to pay that salary. They'd rather pay it to a relative. So I was gonna be let go. So I quit. [Laughs] (S: Oh) But the salaries in those days weren't very, were very low. But the hours weren't up that long. But as I say, it was a good experience, because you realize that that's what you were going to encounter most anywhere. And people are entitled to their preferences as far as I was concerned. (S: Um hm) And not only that, but it, it served me in a good way, because it gave me a chance to take a ah, post graduate course at the high school. And you get more familiar with working people of both sexes, which is something I hadn't had until I worked in Lowell.

S: Because you went to an all girl school?

I: An all girl school.

S: Was that so with most of the French speaking people? They sent their girls to girls' parochial school, and the boys to a boys' parochial school?

I: That's right. That was the custom then you know. (S: Um hm) And (--)

S: Now was it easier to get a job when the owner of the company was French? (I: No) Could you get a job anywhere else?

I: Most anywhere else. I only was refused (--) Well not really refused, but told once that if, the fact that I was Catholic I could not work. Well I wouldn't have too much of a chance. But that was a definitely, um, Protestant organization and I probably shouldn't have applied there in the first place.

S: Well, where was that, in Lowell?

I: The YMCA.

S: At the YMCA? (I: Umhm.) Ah, because (--)

I: Well they told me that there was no, not much chance of getting a job by the fact that I was Catholic. (S: I see.) Or vice versa, I don't know which, you know.

S: I see, but that was the only (--)

I: That was the only, yup that's right.

S: Job prejudiced religion. (I: That's right.) Did you find any other prejudice because you were French among Irish, or Greeks, or other ethnic groups?

I: Personally, I didn't, because see, I opted to work for the government, and the government didn't make any difference.

S: I know, but there's other people, other French people have difficulties.

I: Yes, some did have difficulties.

S: In what ways? In what way? Do you know of anybody that had problems?

I: Well, I would believe that perhaps because maybe they spoke English with an accent, and people didn't care too much about that. I'm not really sure. As far as I was concerned, I mean I (--)

S: Do you know of any particular cases that people had (I: No, I'm sorry I don't) an open prejudice (I: No) against French? (I: No) The groups got along well in Lowell. I know that there's some (--)

I: No, they didn't really. They didn't really get along well. There was always big competition, or friction. But as far as (--)

S: In what way was there competition, or friction?

I: Well I would believe in politics for instance. I mean the (--) Well I think it was a stick-together thing. It was just perhaps a good thing in a way, because if they wanted their own people to succeed, they had to stand by them. (S: Umhm) You know. I may be criticized for saying this, but I don't think that at that time the French were united enough to, to stick by their own. In other words, instead of (--) Suppose they had, they would have had three candidates. Instead of sacrificing two, and going for one to make sure that that one would be elected, they would stick, they would keep their loyalties to the three. You know, which I think prevented them from, from getting ahead sooner.

S: In politics?

I: That was in politics. And the only time that they diverted from that, it made me very proud and very happy, was when Dewey Archambault was elected Mayor of Lowell. I believe I was old enough in those days to go to the caucus. And my mother of course, loved politics, because in Canada they had the reds and the blues, and she was very strong on, I don't know which side, but she was very strong following politics. So we always discussed politics in the house.

S: In the house did you discuss the politics of Canada at that time?

I: No, no.

S: Oh!

I: We had nothing to do with Canada.

S: No, because you said your mother was interested in red and blue?

I: Well she had known, she had known about it. So she would, she had an interest in politics as such. You know, and no, we didn't discuss the politics of Canada because it was a clear break for both of them when they came to the United States.

S: I see. You went to the caucus you said.

I: We went to the caucus and they were proposing Mr. Archambault, and it was supposed evidently to break the tie. Young as I was, I could see why it was being done, because he didn't seem to have much of a chance at the time. And contrary to their expectations, not only did he break the tie, but he brought down the city by a landslide. So he got elected. And it was the first time that we really had someone that you know, really represented us and that we were very, very proud to have there.

S: He was the first French Mayor in Lowell? (I: That's right.) And the community was very proud of that?

I: Yah, yah, and for this one time they really stuck together and you know there were no personal preferences involved at all. They all, everybody that I know of voted for Mr. Archambault. And I believe if he had stayed in politics he would have gone very, very far. But I guess he was not a politician at heart, you know, he was just a very good, honest man, that's all.

S: Now Mr. Archambault is connected with the funeral home that is here on your street?

I: That's right.

S: Can you tell me more about the other French institutions that are on Pawtucket Street?

I: All right. On Pawtucket Street, well we have the Archambault Funeral Home, and before Laurin bought it, it was the O'Donnell, O'Donnell (--) No, what's another big family that lived there, and then Laurin.

S: Were they a French family also?

I: No. No, next to Archambault was not French. But then Laurin bought it and became, so. And then we had, of course we have the hospital, the corner of Merrimack. The Saint Joseph's Hospital.

S: St. Joseph's Hospital, umhm.

I: And we have the CMAC.

S: Now St. Joseph's Hospital is run by the nuns?

I: The Grey Nuns.

S: From Canada?

I: From Canada. (S: Umhm) And they, they took it over when, from the Corporation Hospital. (S: Umhm) Then before (--)

S: Can you tell me more about them? Oh all right, continue with (--)

I: Before, yah, where the parking lot of the Arcadia is, used to be homes there owned by a doctor. Doctor Mineau, I think. And then across (--)

S: Now the Arcadia Nursing Home is also connected with St. Joseph's Hospital?

I: Yes, but I (--)

S: Also French?

I: Yes, but I don't know too much about that.

S: All right.

I: Because this is new and I don't, (S: Umhm) I had no occasion to find out about it. (S: All right) Coming back this way from Archambault, there was a very beautiful brick building there owned by the Marin family, which was a very prominent French family, French Canadian family in Lowell. I don't know too much about them. (S: Um hm) But I do know that they had this beautiful (--) When they vacated it I guess it became an hospice. The Grey Nuns of Quebec, the same ones that operate the Franco-American School now, which at that time was known as the Franco-American Orphanage, (S: Um hm) they operated it as an hospice for, well much like D'Youville Manor. For old, for people who were not only old, but sick, mostly sick.

S: D'Youville Manor out on Varnum Avenue?

I: Out on Varnum Avenue.

S: Is also part of the French community?

I: That's right, part of the French community. And um, though they accept all denominations and all races I guess. (S: Umhm) And that, I don't know what their rulings are, but I would imagine they accept anybody that can afford to go there.

S: Now that French school now, it's a parochial school? Ah, used to be the orphanage?

I: Yes, and when, that's what I was getting at. When I left the Spinard Club Plan (S: Okay) those two years that I was out of work, I worked there as a teacher of French. The five, six, seven and eighth grade, I taught French. And I did that for two years until (--)

S: And who was there at the time? Was it an orphanage when you were teaching?

I: It was an orphanage at the time.

S: And did they just take orphans, French children as French orphans?

I: Well you see in those days where French was predominantly taught in the schools, a child that did not speak French would have been (--) I, you know, I don't think it was a matter of their not accepting the child. It's the fact of the parents not placing the child there, because it's the same thing as when I was in boarding school, where it was strictly bilingual. I mean a child who didn't speak any French was more or less lost. The same as a French child who didn't speak any English would have been lost, (S: Um hm) in the same kind of a school. (S: Um hm) I don't think there was any prejudice there as far as refusing. The only thing, I don't think that parents would have, or even the courts would have placed anybody in a situation like that.

S: Is that how the orphans went there, through the courts?

I: Not necessarily. Some of them did go through the courts, some were orphans, and some were, I imagine they must have been abandoned children or something, that were directed to the school there.

S: So most of the children that were there could speak French?

I: Yes. At the time that I was there, yes. (S: I see.) We had very few that did not speak French.

S: So I was wondering how they got there? Who put them there, was it the parish priests?

I: Usually the parents, yes, parish priests and it was referrals, you know.

S: Now there were many orphans in those days evidently. (I: Right.) Why was that? Do you have any ideas?

I: Well you said before, you thought it was odd that parents of Canadian extraction only had two or three children. Well parents that married and had three, four, five, six children, if one of the parents died it stands to reason there were six children that were orphans, (S: Um hm.) you know. So that they would have to be placed. (S: I see) I had two cousins that were orphans there, back in 1913 I believe. Their mother died and my aunts were able to take the brother in, and one of his sons was about thirteen or fourteen. But the two little girls, they couldn't. (S: Um hm) You know, so the children had to be placed. So they were placed in the orphanage until my uncle married, remarried. And as soon as he remarried he took his little girls back home with them.

S: I see, that's what would happen?

I: That's the typical situation.

S: Did the mothers die at childbirth in those days? Is that why they were put in the orphanage?

I: A lot of them died at childbirth and then a lot of them well, childbirths of course after having had brought a few children before. Or they would take sick. Like you take my grandmother Barry, she died in her forties. (S: Um hm.) But she died of cancer. So that had nothing to do with having leaving orphan, but still she wasn't, you know, she wasn't old. They, I think people died younger then. So that even a woman in her forties that had had children probably would still have some that would be young enough to be in institutions. Unless the relatives could take them. And sometimes the relatives couldn't. (S: Umhm) And that's usually the way they knew about it.

S: What else did you want to tell me about the orphanage when you worked there?

I: It was very interesting. Um, I'd prepare my classes and I give the classes of course in French. It was no speaking French, or learning French the way it's taught in the schools, regardless of whether it's grammar schools or high schools today, or college. Um, it was strictly all in one language. And it was interesting to meet all the young people you know, I mean, and you formed a bond with them. I enjoyed it. (S: Um hm.) So that's about all I can say about that.

S: Were there children that were adopted from that orphanage?

I: Some were. Some were, but most of them were not. Most of them were not, because they would come in. See they didn't take babies. So that, they did take them very young though, five, six years old. But usually the children stayed in the orphanage until they were old enough to go to a relative, you know, when they got a little older. (S: Umhm) There's only one family that I knew. There were three girls and they were orphaned. They had to go to another school in Canada and they moved to Lowell. And they were placed in the orphanage until they graduated from the eighth grade. And in those days they were able to go from the eighth grade onto the high school. So, which was good. I think they kept them till they were sixteen. I'm not sure. (S: Um hm.) They were allowed to keep them.

S: Were any of them sent to Canada to relatives? (I: No.) No, they just kept them here. (I: It just happened to be) So the French community had all kinds of institutions here to take care of their own people?

I: That's right. They could take care of most any problem that surfaced, you know.

S: What other institutions are there on Pawtucket Street?

I: Well we had on Pawtucket Street.

S: Now that, with the club that (--)

I: The CMAC Club, that was (--)

S: You didn't tell me about that.

I: Al lright, the CMAC Club. My father did not belong to it. My cousins did and my uncle did. It was a club where people met, and usually they met during the week. But they usually, Sundays, men usually went there on Sunday mornings.

S: Just men?

I: Yes, that was strictly a men's club.

S: What do the initials stand for? Do you know?

I: Catholic, CMAC . . . (thinking)

S: Was that something like the YWCA only this was Catholic?

I: Yah, but, no, it wasn't, they didn't.

S: Canadian something?

I: No, club? (Thinking)

S: All right,

I: I don't know. (S: All right, that's fine.) Off hand I don't know.

S: All right, but it was for Canadian men. Well (--).

I: For Canadian (--). Well French, of French extraction.

S: French extraction.

I: French extraction.

S: Okay. Well French extraction. The people that were here were mostly from Canada weren't they? (I: That's right) Were there any from France?

I: No, except that when I was in high school, not in high school, when I was in grade school, the third grade, I had a friend, her father was Belgian. Ah, Angeline de Bisieux. She was, her mother was French, but her father was Belgian.

Tape I, side A ends
Tape I, side B Begins

S: ... 12, 1985. Irene, you want to tell me more about the Club?

I: Yes, that club on, the CMAC was the locale for different parties that they had, run either for the church or for other benefits. During the years that, the early years, when my mother was single as well as after they were married. But one interesting thing that she used to tell us about, is that at that time Canadian people, or people of Canadian descent, we were not really allowed to go dancing. And my mother used to tell the story that she went to a benefit, was supposed to start out with a, like a card party but it was really to end up in a dance. And someone asked my mother to dance, and she did. And when she came back to her place, my aunt was waiting for her with her hat and coat and off they went home, because my aunt had promised not to let her sister go to dances. And that was one of the promises that they had to make when they left Canada. Both my

grandmother and my aunt who were older than my mother. And so that's one of the aspects (--)

S: Why is that?

I: Oh, I guess they frowned on dancing in those days, you know.

S: Did they think it was immoral?

I: Immoral. I don't know really. Well I guess they probably thought that would be the word. But they just did not believe in dancing. So she wasn't allowed to go dancing.

S: But could she go dancing with her husband?

I: Oh. With her husband after he was married, that's a different story.

S: After she was married, it's all right. Oh, oh.

I: But that was before she was married. And um, well anyway, that club was the locale for, oh, people used to run parties, or (pauses) different kinds parties, either for the church or for individuals. You could rent the rooms upstairs. (S: Uhhm) Um, then (pauses).

S: The men could invite the women in when they had the social affairs?

I: I don't know that. That I don't know. See I haven't had no brothers. I don't know. I'm not aware on that score. I'm not too sure. And my father didn't belong. So there was no contact. Going back down Merrimack Street, there was a church, St. Jean Baptiste, and then the hall.

S: Why don't you tell us about the church?

I: Yes, the church. I made my First Communion (--) Oh I did not make my First Communion at a church. I made my First Communion in my own house, because I was too sick (S: Oh) to receive without drinking afterwards. So it was a special privilege I would say, especially in those days. I made my First Communion in my own house here. And, but I did attend church with my family, and we used to go to Mass. And we used to have, there was the Sodality. There were two. There was the Women's Sodality, St. Anne's Sodality, and there was the sodality of des Moiselles de Notre Dame de Lourdes, which was for the single girls. And there was also Des Enfants de Marie for the school children. Well, when we came back to Lowell, by that time I was eighteen years old. So I did belong to the Sodality. And there was a very interesting person that lived on Merrimack Street at that time, corner of Spaulding Street, by the name of Mrs. Vincent. And this Mrs. Vincent was very much responsible for helping people to become citizens. And at her bidding I taught English and Arithmetic at the, it was a little club on School Street. I forget the name of the club though.

S: School Street in where? Right here on Pawtucket Street?

I: Right here off Pawtucket Street here. Education. L'Association et du Chatrist. And she gave classes to people so that they would learn English, and whatever they needed to pass the test to become Americans. And that was, that was I would say, one of the big features or the very, I would say valuable things that the Canadians did for each other. They did help each other to become citizens you know. And so if they needed help in learning language, English, or learning about America, about the United States, there were places where they could get that knowledge. Besides the public where it was offered at the public schools, or whatever, but the city, but this was on an individual basis. (S: Um. hmo) And St. Jean Baptiste was a very beautiful, is a very beautiful church. And it used to be full. We used to have midnight masses. And both the upper and lower church were full, to overflowing. You had to make your reservations in a way, you know, as to get in, because, and that's not

S: You had to make reservations to get in the pew?

I: Well in other words, not really reservations to get in the pew, but to make sure that you would be able to get in the church.

S: Oh really? It was that crowded?

I: It was that crowded. It's hard to believe, but it was that crowded.

S: That's why they had to build other churches?

I: No. Well the reason they had to build other churches is because people moved out of the parish. But still in all, the whole of what they call "Little Canada," that's across the canal, in back of the church, and all along Moody Street, it was all French Canadian people mostly. And as you said before, they all had large families. So everybody went to church. And that's not counting the fact that at that time St. Joseph's, which is St. Joseph's Shrine now, had a midnight mass. So that you know, the three places were full. I mean I'm talking about the Midnight Masses for Christmas now. (S: Umhm) But they had many masses and I would say there was very good attendance at all those masses. (S: Um hm) Of course the Canadian population of the parish was much higher than it is today. And everybody went to church too, you know.

S: Now it's different?

I: Well now it's very different. I mean we're down to I don't know if it's 300 families or something. It's really, you know, the parish has lost an awful lot.

S: That's because people moved out?

I: I think that the Urban Renewal really destroyed the Canadian population around St. Jean the Baptiste. I was not in a position when these things were happening to be able to take part in these things. And I'm not a politician. I'm not a store owner. So that how it happened and why it happened, I don't know. But personally I feel very strongly and very sad that it did happen that way. Because it wiped out a whole generation of people. They were forced to move and it stands to reason there's no place for them to come back. So that they're not coming back. So now our parish has lost an awful lot.

S: Do you think that the Canadians have lost their identity now, because they had to disperse?

I: No.

S: No?

I: They haven't, because they went, either they went to another parish that was a Canadian parish. We have Ste. Jeanne d'Arc, we have Notre Dame de Lourdes, we have Ste. Marie's in South Lowell. As far as not speaking as much the French and going to the English more, that has nothing to do with the fact that they were dispersed. It would have probably happened just the same.

S: Umhm.

I: No I don't think so. I don't think so. But it did affect St. Jean the Baptist themselves, very very much. That's about all.

S: Now the French Canadians speak their language? They like to keep the language. They're bilingual. (I: Right.) How many generations keep that? When they're here, do they all keep it, two or three generations after they've come here?

I: I would say two generations. And now it's hard to say because the children's children don't speak it.

S: They don't speak (unclear)?

I: No, even people of my generation who married, who inter-married into another nationality, the children have lost the French.

S: Now was there much of that, intermarriage?

I: No. Well fifty years ago there wasn't, it was frowned upon. Thirty years ago it was tolerated. (S: Um hm) And now, well I guess it's accepted, which in a way is a good thing, because there is good in every nationality. And I mean, there was a saying in French.. "Qui perd sa lang perd sa foie." In other words, if you lose your, if you marry into another tongue you lose your faith, you know, if you're not French. And that's not true, because you can marry a person of the same faith, and even though you don't speak

the same language, you can keep your faith. That has nothing to do with it. But I think that as far as losing the language, yes, there is.

S: Umhm. And probably losing the French culture too, when they intermarry? Do they (unclear)?

I: Well that is harder to lose in a way, because if the culture is brought into the home, well I'll probably be frowned upon for saying this, but I think if a girl is French, then she marries, she is going to set up her home the way she wants it. If she's really, has really the French culture, it's going to reflect on the way she's going to carry her home, bring up her children. Um, if the man is French, it probably will be harder, because then he will have to impose it on his wife first. (S: Umhm) You know? But I would think that some of it is carried through. I don't see any reason why it shouldn't.

S: Do French Canadian families, do they keep going back to Canada?

I: Some of them did. Some of them did very much. I mean some of it was the highlight of their, of any vacation plan that they would have, would always be to go to Canada. (S: Um hm) It was not the case in my case, in our case. Neither on my father's or my mother's side, all the relatives, the same way. We felt the same way. I mean there was no. Once they were here, they were here and that was it.

S: Do you know of families who have come to Lowell, or Manchester or anywhere, that have gone back to live in Canada after they've lived here for awhile?

I: I don't know any families that have done that from Lowell, but I know of a woman, who worked in Washington, for the State Department for 30 years. And when she retired, she went to retire to Canada. (S: Um hm) So you see the ties were, the ties, some people that's the way they think (S: um hm) you know.

S: But it's not done frequently then?

I: No, no.

S: Because some of the European people that come over here, sometimes go back and retire in their home countries.

I: Yes, I know of a friend of mine who is trying to get back into the United States right now.

S: From where?

I: From Austria. (S: Really.) She lived in Lowell and um, she went back to Austria about, maybe five years ago. And now she's trying her hardest to come back to Lowell. She wants to come back to this country. But I think that's more frequent with people that come from outside the United States than from those that come from Canada. (S: Umhm)

There are some few, but I think . . . I think the reason a lot of people come from Canada is that they wanted to better themselves. Either the economy, not the economy. Their situation in Canada was such, that they were not able to make a living. So they came to the United States. (S: Um hm) Well you don't have too much use for a place that doesn't give you um, livelihood.

S: But I thought maybe if they made money here, they could go back and establish themselves there, because some of the European countries people do.

I: Perhaps some did, but I don't know of any.

S: You don't know of any?

I: I don't know of any.

S: Okay. (I: No) So was it fun growing up in the French community?

I: It was to a certain extent, yes. I'm not a very good example of that because of the fact that my growing up years was spent away from Lowell, (S: um hm) but when I did come back, yes. I made friends in Lowell. It was fun to meet on Sunday afternoons. And to sing songs and to exchange ideas, to go places.

S: Where did you meet?

I: In the home. In the friends homes. I met these girls um, at the Sodality. They belonged to the choir. I couldn't sing, but we struck up a friendship. I made my friends through my mother's friends. Now my mother introduced me to these women that she had known before we left Lowell. (S: Um hm) See our social life was disrupted by those ten years (S: Ya.) that we spent. So that it was a case of picking up again when we came back to Lowell. So she introduced me to some friends of hers. Some I took up a friendship with and others, I didn't. But the ones that I did, well, we remained friends, and um, we used to visit at their homes.

S: That was the form of entertainment then?

I: As far as we were concerned, yes, or we would go to the movies. They had movies at the hall, at the parish hall. We'd go to the movies. Personally, we didn't go to the movies downtown very much.

S: Why was that?

I: I don't know. As long as the movies were available on Sunday afternoons we didn't care to go.

S: Um hm.

I: There were plays at the hall in those days. I mean the college and the convent. The students put on plays. So we'd go to the plays, when there were plays. (S: Um hm.) There was a very big play that was put on, La Princesse des Mohawk, (Spells MOHAWK). La Princesse des Mohawk, which is about (Kateri Tekakwitha). This was a play put on by a Miss Aupin. She was a single, well she lived alone. (S: Um hm) She was a single lady, and she used to put on plays. And she used to gather everybody, all the parishioners, and even people outside the parish if they had wanted to, that wanted to be in the play. We were in the play. It was a very big expensive play that was put on. And then there was another one. There was a friend of ours down the street here, Mr. Gaulin, was the principal character. He played the (clistos ?) in the play. And all these plays of course were in French. (S: Umhm.) So that you retain, you know, your French culture. (S: Umhm.) And um, the French was spoken at the meetings. Everybody spoke French. (S: Um hm.) And the prayers were in French. Of course in those days you prayed in Latin in the masses, but even so, the other prayers were all conducted in French. And the meetings of the Sodalities, there was no question of translating, it was all in French, because everybody understood French. (S: Um hm.) And we had wonderful bean suppers. And then again, another thing, at the Franco-American Orphanage here, they used to open up the grounds once a year and we'd have a big huge, I don't know if they called it a Kermess (sp?), but it was like a fair, (S: Umhm.) but it covered all the grounds. And there were booths for games, and booths for all kinds of things. And the food was made. The food was made by individuals. It wasn't catered like it is today. Now they buy most of everything that they serve except at our bean supper. Well that, they still buy the beans already made. But in those days individuals made the different things. (S: Um hm.) And um, that was alot of fun,

S: Tell me, what kind of food would they bring in?

I: Spaghetti. Mostly spaghetti, I guess. And chop suey.

S: But those aren't French foods, are they? [Laughs]

I: No. but that doesn't make any difference. It was something that was easily prepared. No, see they did not, (pauses) they were not in other words stubborn to want to stick to just French foods, (S: Umhm.) because they didn't have to. (S: Umhm.) I means the people were going there to have a good time. So they served what was plentiful and easy to makes (S: Umhm.), you know?

S: You know the Franco-American Orphanage, which is now a school, parochial school, what is it called now, Franco-American Parochial?

I: Franco-American Schools

S: They have the Stations of the Cross there?

I: Oh yes. Oh yes, and those were beautiful. We used to make our Stations of the Cross over there and um, they were lit up sometimes. And you'd go, you could go at night. In

those days you could go anytime of the day or night. There was no danger. There was also the Calvary. (S: Umhm.) And you used to be able, they had the um, one side of the Calvary, you'd go up on your knees because it was that special blessings, or indulgences, if you did it that way, and the other side you came, you walked down. You were able to walk down. That was another very good devotion in those days.

S: Was it done on a certain day?

I: No, you could do it anytime. Anybody could do it,

S: Is it still there?

I: It's still there.

S: People still do it?

I: That I don't know. I would... I don't know. I don't know if, and I never inquired, because now I'm not in a position to do it on my knees as I used to. But I don't really know if the um, there was renewed or whatever.

S: Do other people outside of ah (I: The parish?) the Canadians come? (I: Yes.) Other Catholics?

I: Other Catholics from all over came over that and they enjoyed whatever privileges were there to be enjoyed.

S: And Jack Kerouac wrote a book about that? About his brother Jean?

I: I have not read Jack Kerouac.

S: Okay. He did write a book about that. (I: I know he wrote a book.) About his brother, "Visions of Gerard" (I: Oh yes?) I think was the title of the book.

I: Oh, I didn't ... I have not read Kerouac's book.

S: Not many people in the French Canadian community know Jack Kerouac, or know about him.

I: To be honest with you, personally, I know some very eminent people have recognized Jack Kerouac and have praised him in my parish. I have a great deal of respect for those people who have done it. But personally I don't care for Jack Kerouac. To me I don't think he is typical at all, of the French Canadians.

S: Oh, that's why probably the French Canadians don't appreciate him.

I: No, He is not typical of Jack... of the French people at all. He may be typical of his

age group in his era. (S: Umhm) Ah, the young people of his era, but not the French Canadian.

S: I see, that's why . . .

I: That's my feeling. I mean I . . .

S: That's probably the way the rest of the French Canadians feel about him. Because when I ask about him they (I: They all . . .) don't have much to (I: No,) say about him that's good, because . . .

I: Well I can't say anything bad because I don't know the guy. But I mean ah, from what I read of him, he is not typical of the French Canadian.

S: But he is considered as a leader of the Beat Generation. So (I: That's perhaps why.) a writer did come out of that community,

I: Yes, rights

S: From that parish?

I: That's right. But, but um. . .

S: And Father Morrisette thinks that he's pretty good.

I: That's right. (S: Yah) He's the person I had in mind when I said I had a great deal of respect for Father Morrisette, but (S: Um hm) I mean, I have no respect at all, I'm sorry to say, for Jack Kerouac.

S: Yah, I know that.

I: I'm sorry. That's my age perhaps that is speaking, but (S: Umhm.) I don't identify with, I don't identify with Kerouac at all. And I don't think he identifies with the French Canadian community at the time, either. (S: Umhm.) So I mean maybe he saw a different picture of the French community of which I was not aware of at all. (S: Um hm.) See, I mean um . . . Because see, people of my age group um, in the forties, girls went to Washington to work and they came back. They tried to do something of themselves. Well I don't know of what years Jack Kerouac writes, so I can't compare, but I think that um I'm sorry I don't agree with him.

S: [Laughing] Okay. Now the French Canadians have succeeded in Lowell, have done very well. For instance, there were bankers. Can you tell me about the Jeanne D'Arc Credit Union?

I: Oh, Jeanne D'Arc Credit Union is very, it's a very good family institution. I mean um, they used to be located when they very first started, they used to be located on Merrimack

Street, a little further up, almost across from the ah, from St. Joseph's Hall. It was just a little, like a hole in the wall. One room thing, very small. And then they moved on and on, and they did help French Canadians. I mean you . . . I imagine they probably would have helped anybody who had gone in for a loan, but still in all if they had the collateral. But still in all they made every effort to um, to help you if you needed help. Um, in those days, I only put money ins but um, I know that they were a very helpful, and they still are. I mean, they ah, it's like a friendly, friendly neighbor. Friendly institution that you can really rely on. (S: Umhm.) And um, no I, they um . . . I think mostly, even perhaps though the personnel now does not um, they perhaps don't all speak French, but they're of French extraction. So that they have helped their own. (S: Um. hm.) And that's really wonderful.

S: Now it's open to everybody.

I: It's opened to everybody. It's, but at the time um, even then it was opened to everybody as far as I know. But um, I know they have helped, because of the people that I've seen there, I know that they are the children, of the children, of the children. (S: I see) See, so that's how I know. That's only my observation. It kind of pleases me, you know?

S: All right, during the Depression, were the French people helpful to one another? [Unclear].

I: Very much, very much,

S: In what way?

I: On that score (S: In what way?) we were very supportive. Well they had the St. Vincent de Paul's Society in our parish. And that's kind of a close corporation, but I do believe they did an awful lot of good. And it's perhaps good that they keep it so closed tight so that there's no gossip. But there's an awful lot of good that was done through that organization. (S: um. hm.) And the same thing with the Sodalities. I mean people responded if somebody was in dire need. There were no names mentioned. You Just gave and somebody helped. (S: Um hm.) And ah (--)

S: Did the merchants help?

I: Oh yes. As a matter of fact, going back to my mother used to tell, going back to when the church burned down ah, 1912, that was before she was married. And um, the day that she went back to the store and told them that the church had burned down, she was very sad. They started to give her a loan right away you know, to help.

S: The church burned down? What year?

I: I think it's 1912. (S: Um hm.) Yah, November 21st, 1912.

S: So she was collecting money to rebuild the church?

I: Well she, she mentioned that, you know her, she came . . . She held the stores, the doors opened for the people to come out. So after that, cause she was late for work. And when she got to work she told them that um, the church had burned down, and of course she felt very sad about it. And so they were willing to help her, you know to, whatever the people needed to build. In those days they used to have ah, drives. Well it's like a popularity contest. And people would collect money to helps whatever, you know. Of course you can't do it now, because there's so few parishioners. We can't do it, the same thing now.

S: Now when the church burned down did other people outside the parish help (I: Oh, yes.) rebuild the church?

I: Well yes, that's what I'm saying. (S: I see.) These stores downtown volunteered to help.

S: Even though they weren't Catholic?

I: Oh, even though they were not Catholic. Definitely not Catholic.

S: Oh, they were all willing to give?

I: Yes, that's rights that's right. (S: Um.) So . . .

S: How did you heat the house in those days? With coal?

I: In those days? Yes, this house here was heated with coal. Um, later on we had what they called a stoker service, which was the rice coal. Um, my house here is heated with hot air vents. Now it's oil, but in those days it was coal. (S: Umhm.) The kitchen stove was coal, was heated with coal and wood.

S: Did you have central heating when you first moved here in this house?

I: It always had the hot air vents as far back as I know. So if you call that central heating, that's what it is. (S: I see, uhuh.) Except for the kitchen. This kitchen has to have a stove that heats it up.

S: Okay. You used to have the black stove [unclear].

I: We used to have a black stove.

S: I'm looking around for a black stove. [Both laugh]

I: It's gone. It's downstairs in the cellar.

S: Oh you still have it?

I: I still have it. (S: Uh huh,) Oh yes, and ah my father and I, those two years that I told you about that to me was a Godsend in a way, I worked half a day at the Franco-American School, and then I'd go with my father, and we'd row up the river and gather the wood along the banks and bring it back and use it for firewood, (S: Oh!)

I: It was one of the best experiences of my life.

S: Were you, the river is at your back door?

I: The river is in my back door.

S: You had a boat?

I: We had a boat. Just a plain rowboat. There was no wall in those days, because ah, well we hadn't put the wall up. And we'd just go row all the way up to the river as far as Myer's Threadmill sometimes. And whatever logs that were lying along the shore, sometimes there would even be ties, which is Georgia pines, burns like nothing and burns, you know it's very very extensive heat because of the creosole and everything in it. But (S: hm.) um we used to gather the wood and bring it home to the back yard there. And my father would pull it in and saw it. And um, we had, he had no boys, so somebody had to help him. And I did it and I loved it. (S: Umhm.) And um we used the wood for firewood. (S: Umhm.) And even though we only used coal as you said, the stove was fired at night, but during the day it was wood that we used. (S: Umhm.) And ah, it gave a very nice hot fire, you know. So, oh yes, we did, it was very nice.

S: Your father bought the house in 1930?

I: I think 1911 my father bought this house.

S: Oh, in 1911?

I: 1911 he bought the house with his brother. And um, eventually it came into my possession through inheritance. (S: Um hm) My father left his half to my mother. My uncle left his half to his mother and his sister. When the sister died, my aunt, she left her half to me and I got the other half from my mother. So now I own the house.

S: And now it's a beautiful location. And I'm looking out your kitchen window and I see the Merrimack River floating by. (I: Um hm.) And you have a nice place to enjoy here,

I: Yah, we have a garden. We used to have fruit trees, apple trees and pear trees, and a cherry tree. And we had blackberries, and all that is gone. And the only thing that's left, oh, and the grapevine. The only thing that's left is the grapevine. And now instead of blackberries, we have black raspberries growing. And um, after my father died, of course we came back the year of the flood, 35 or 36 whatever the year was.

S: Did it affect your house?

I: No, it only went...came, because we were all built on banks here. It only went as far as the floor of the barn. Now the barn is gone, and the garage is gone. But after my father died, instead of buying him a monument we decided that you're supposed to save the land, we had a wall built. So, in a way, that wall is a monument of my father. His memory, because he loved the land and he cared for it. So um now, ah . . .

S: In 19 . . .

Tape I, side B ends

Tape II, side A begins

S: We're continuing the interview with Irene Desmarais. This is the second tape. Irene tell me about the French Canadians who are in prominent positions in Lowell now.

I: Well the most prominent ones would be the ones that are in office right now. (S: Right) Um (pauses) of past, people in the past, was uh, well we named Dewey Archambault. That was way, way back. And now we have (They both begin to speak at the same time.)

S: He was the first politician to get into, the first Canadian politician.

I: The first politician to get, the first Canadian politician to get into office. And um . . .

S: Today there are many of them.

I: There are many of them.

S: How many on the City Council today?

I: I don't know.

S: They're about three.

I: Three at least. (S: Umhm.) Three at least. And um, then we have um, others in the community projects that are also of French Canadian extractions. We have some that are teaching, in the teaching professions. We have doctors. Quite a few doctors.

S: Can you name some of them? Think of any names off hand?

I: Well years ago there was a Doctor Houle in Lowell. He's not (S: All right.) here anymore. Dr. Emile Houle.

S: All right, when you first came here, and when you were eighteen, who was your doctor then?

I: There was doctor Dr. King, and his son now, I understand is still a doctor. There was a Doctor King

S: He was a Frenchman?

I: No, I don't know. It probably was Roy, but probably was changed. (S: I see, um hm.) But he was King. He was ah, he was a prince of a fellow, He was a very wonderful man, and he had a large French Canadian clientele. And there was um, there was a Dr. Roy here on Wannalancit Street, years ago. There was a Dr. Rochette here when I was a child. And of later years, well of course there's many other doctors. There was a doctors Drapeau, that were French, both the dentist and the doctor. And um, there's Romanowsky is it, I think um, they're nephews of the Drapeaus. The doctors Drapeau. And the two of them are doctors now. And um, they're in Lowell. Um, there're quite a few in Lowell. There's people from the Lowell community that are hairdressers, like Joseph's downtown. Ah. the others I don't know. (S: Um hm,) Um, I imagine that ah, through the years the people of French extractions have made their way and achieved (S: Um hm.) good positions in the City of Lowell.

S: The Union National Bank is the largest bank in Lowell. (I: Yes) Did they have a French president?

I: They had a French President, Homer Bourgeois, and quite a few people working there at the time who were of French extraction. (S: Um hm.) I imagine there still are.

S: They still, ah, they still support the French speaking people, or the French extraction people when they (I: I imagine if people apply) are they in a position to hire them.

I: They're in a position to hire them. I imagine they . . .

S: They do hire them and support them?

I: They support them, yes. And um...

S: How about Leo Desjarlais, who (--)

I: Desjarlais, he's with the housing, isn't he?

S: Umhm. He's brought millions of dollars into the city.

I: That's right, he has. And now they're finding ways of getting grants, so that um, people um, are able to, well get the benefits of those grants (S: Umhm.) for whatever they need them . . .

S: So that's the way Desjarlais brings the money into Lowell, government grants?

I: That's right, (S: Um hm.) government grants.

S: And that helps the poor people in Lowell.

I: That's right. And um, the (--) We have some people who are artists. One especially that I know is Jeannine Tardiff, (spells) T A R D I F F. Her father used to be, um, had a store, a grocery store on Merrimack Street. And her mother, before she was married, was my, well more or less my boss when I worked at that first job that I had at Spinards.

S: Umhm.

I: Yvonne Lussier her name was. And um . . . that's...

S: Are there many small businessmen?

I: Quite a few. (S: Um hm.) Soucy is one of them. (S: Um hm,) Poirier is another. Hardy, (spells) H A R D Y, Hardy. (S: Um hm.) I guess they're in all kinds of businesses and trades, you know?

S: Now I've talked to a soldier who is not from Lowell. When I told him I was from Lowell, he says, "Oh, I know Moody Street." Why would he know Moody Street?

I: Well, I had the same experience. When I went to work in Washington in 1940 and they'd say, "Where do you come from", because they couldn't identify my, my talk, my accent. (S: Um) So they couldn't figure out whether it was a mixture of French, or I did speak with a small accent, but it was a combination of Boston accent and Canadian French. I still have it, and I have tried to lose it through the years. Ah, but when I'd say I came from Lowell, they would say Moody Street. Now I think that Moody Street gained fame because of the war and the army. The soldiers from Devens used to come to Lowell for their weekends and they perhaps were entertained by certain people on Moody Street; certain elements on Moody Street. And, which was, what you might call, in very common language, a red-light district. (S: Umhm.) And um, evidently it's known the world over.

S: Isn't that amazing!

I: Yah. It's really amazing, but let's see. It was by word of mouth and by the people who came through here. (S: Umhm) And that's the one word that stayed. (S: Umhm) Personally at the time I didn't know Moody Street as such, being from Lowell. Ah, but um that's perhaps the explanation for it, (S: Umhm.) but every city had a special street, you know.

S: Of course. Ah, another thing that I'd like to know more about is the bootlegging during prohibition. That went on in every ethnic community in Lowell.

I: That's right, and people were very, supposedly, very honorable bootleg liquor from Canada. They'd um . . .

S: They'd bring it in from Canada?

I: Yes. They'd bring it in from Canada. They'd go all the way to Canada. They'd drive their cars through cornfields to get it in. And where they sold it here in Lowell, I don't know. (S: Umhm.) But it was an undercover operation.

S: But everybody knew about it?

I: Everybody knew about it.

S: Everybody in the community?

I: That's right.

S: Did any people get caught and sent, were sentenced to jail?

I: Some got caught, but I don't remember anybody ever going to jail. (S: I see) I don't remember that. (S: Umhm.) No, I don't . . .

S: Now what did they bring? The home-made liquor?

I: I imagine it would have been the home-made brew. I don't know. I really don't know. Didn't happen in our family. So I don't really know, (S: No) but I'd only know . . .

S: But you may have heard?

I: I've heard about the stories about it, yes.

S: They didn't have their own stills here?

I: Not that I know of. No, I think it was mostly the (S: It was brought in?) brought in, yes, the brought in stuff.

S: And the connections were easy, because they had family there. They knew they would ...

I: That's right, and then they had access to the farms, and the fields. So they were able to (S: Um hm.) move it I guess. Until they got caught, and then they tried another route.

S: Now were there many people in the French community that drank?

I: I don't think at that time, that more of the French community drank any heavier than any other, any other denom . . . um, nationality. Only thing is um, I remember my mother saying, it was sad that um, a rich person would have, could drink at the club and nothing was thought about it, but a poor man would get caught drunk because he was drinking it on a park bench, you know.

S: Oh, they were allowed to drink it in the clubs?

I: In the clubs there were certain (--) Well maybe they weren't allowed, but they were doing it. So that nobody knew they were getting drunk because the members would just take care of them. (S: Um hm.) But if a person did it on the outside, well it was in public view or, then they would be more apt to get caught. I mean, but I ... that was no different for the Canadians than anybody else, because anybody that was, every nationality had their own clubs evidently, you know. (S: Umhm.) And that actually, that's what a club is for, I mean to take care of its own. It's this little select group and that's it. (S: Um hm.) So . . .

S: So you don't know too much about what happened in those days with bootlegging?

I: No.

S: Nothing?

I: No, we were not involved.

S: But you were aware that it was going on?

I: We were aware that it was involved. My parents, uncles and aunts on either side were not drinkers. So we don't have any ah, I don't know.

S: You don't know too much about it?

I: We don't know too much about it.

S: Is there anything else now that you'd like to tell me about the French community. How they got along with the other groups as a community, not individually.

I: [Pauses] Um, I have ah, I don't know too much about it. I have a feeling that the French held on to their own. I mean like I was telling you about those parties that we had at the Franco-American School. It was for the Franco-Americans, Anybody else who wanted to come in was most welcomed. It was like a big circus. But I don't recall of our getting together with other groups. Now, I understand in the last few years, they've been having what they call "block parties." And they, to get the Irish, and the Greeks, and the French together a couple of times a year, um, along the canal there, somewhere. But um, that's only of late years. In my time the French held to their own.

S: They were insulated.

I: That's right, they were more or less insulated. And it was a big enough community that they didn't have to go outside of the community to get anything that they wanted. You know, they had it there.

S: Were there people who did not speak English? Who did not need to speak English because everything was in the, was within the community?

I: That's right. In those days you did not have to speak English if you did not want to. But, I would say this, that the majority of our old people at that time (S: Umhm.) had learned so speak English. It was a matter of pride. (S: Umhm) They had learned to speak English. (S: Umhm.) And um, they, that's probably why the um, my generation, they all spoke English. And some of them perhaps were embarrassed because the parents did not speak as good English. But still in all, they respected the parents enough, so that they would speak French with them in the home, but if the parents wanted to speak English, they would encourage them to speak English. So it was no um, it was no isolation really,

S: Well back in the days when you were teaching them to speak English so they could get their citizenship papers, (I: Yes.) did everybody want to get their citizenship papers at that time?

I: Oh yes.

S: Or did they have an idea of going back to Canada?

I: No. No, they came here to settle here. They had no intentions of going back to Canada. That's as far as I know. (S: Um hm.) I mean, the ones I came in contact with. I mean in the space of two years there's not too much, but I mean the ones I did come in contact with, it was like the International Institute a little bit. You know, they fostered um, I guess there probably was politics involved in it too.

S: In what way?

I: We introduced different candidates. Different types. Not necessarily French candidates, but different candidates that would. I don't know if they sponsored it or not. I really don't know. But I do know of meeting people of, that went to run for public office. See in those days we elected a mayor. It wasn't electing the same way as it's done today. (S: Right.) So there would be more of a personal contact (S: Umhm.) at that time. (S: Umhm.)

S: Tell me, what was the big holiday that the French Canadians celebrated?

I: Our holidays were Christmas and New Years, as far as the big holidays. Of course we celebrated Thanksgiving like everybody else, and the Fourth of July. But for growing up

it was mostly Christmas. There was a little left over of celebrating New Years. Um, New Years was a very religious holiday. So was Christmas, but it was more of a fun holiday, whereas New Years was more of a religious holiday. In most Canadian families, there was a very beautiful custom that I want to bring out here. It was the asking of the benediction, the blessing. Um . . .

S: When was this?

I: That was done on New Years Day the moment you got up in the morning. As the first child to get up in the morning would seek out the father of the house and would ask for his bene . . . his blessing. If you were the oldest, well you did the honors. And um, your father would get all emotional at that time because he felt very unworthy. I guess his um, his role as a father, and as the um, was brought out to him in a more, in a very different way, a very positive way. And um, he'd feel very good you know, I mean, and so did the children. And it was sometimes . . . I remember when I was twelve or thirteen, I mean I don't know what I had done just before, during the holidays and I kind of dreaded to ask the blessing because I was afraid he might say something. But he never did. He never did. They always felt more embarrassed than we did, giving the blessing. And of course that was taught by the mothers usually. When you were too small to ask the blessing, the mother would ask it for us. As we grew older, I remember my father, his father had died. I remember my father, the first thing that we did, my grandmother lived upstairs. New Years Day would be going upstairs and asking his mother for the blessing. That's because she stood in the place of father and mother for both of them. And the thing was beautiful because my uncles would come with their children, and they would have already given the blessing to their children. He would come with their children and ask my grandmother for the blessing. And that was not uncommon in most Canadian families. That was one of the um, well the highlights of the day, you know. And um, then we sang of course. There were parties, and there were good foods served. The pork pies, which is something that every family makes in a different way. You cannot say well, if you can find a pork pie that tastes like your mother's tasted, well you're lucky because chances are it won't, because everybody had a little something different that they did. And um, the pork pies were all pork. There were no um, there were no potatoes in them. I mean there might have been, maybe they would have mixed a little of ground beef, but ah, usually it was all pork.

S: Was that served on New Years Day?

I: It was not necessarily the meal for New Years Day, but it was served at New Years Day. And there was always some, that if anybody came in that they would be able, they would be offered a piece of "toutierre" they called it, pork pies.

S: How is that made? Why don't you give us your recipe off the hand?

I: Off hand, I won't give you the exact measurements. We'll say 1 1/2 pounds of pork, I mix it with maybe I pound of beef, ground beef; ground pork and ground beef. And um, some onion you chop into that. And you um, . . .

S: You brown your meat?

I: You brown your meat, and you bring it to a boil. You add some water to it. You have to add so much water to it, and you bring it to a boil. And um, you cool it, and then you put it in your pastry and you bake it. And we add some salt and pepper, and a little bit of cloves and allspice. And um, that's the way we do it. Now for . . .

S: How long do you bake it?

I: Oh, I think it's 30 minutes.

S: That's all?

I: 30 to 40 minutes. And um, till the crust is nice and brown. And you can eat it with boiled potatoes and picalilly, homemade picalilly, of which I don't know the recipe offhand either. (S: Umhm.) But, and uh . . . But there's one thing I'd like to say um . . . My mother used to stuff her turkey, or chicken with the left over of a pork roast or a beef roast. Contrary to having it, using the ground pork, ground meat to do it. And um, she used to grind the meat and the different parts from the chicken, or turkey, and ground all that together and mash it with her potatoes, a little onion and seasoning. By this I mean, cinnamon, allspice and clove again. And um, she would stuff the turkey with that. So actually it was a meal going into the turkey to start off with. And it's still a delicacy to this day. I mean I enjoy doing it that way. And of course in those days we had the midnight mass. And people would go to midnight mass. Well in our case my mother was the one that had the youngest children. So she would stay home and people would come back to our house for the midnight meal.

S: What was this, Christmas or New Years?

I: Christmas.

S: Umhm.

I: Christmas. Nowadays people have midnight mass at 9:00. So you don't do it that way. (S: Umhm.) You can still eat afterwards, but it hasn't got the same um.

S: Did you fast before you?

I: Oh yes, in those days you fasted. You couldn't eat before you went to midnight mass. So it was really hard for her to do all the cooking and not, you know, break her fast.

S: How long did you have to fast before?

I: Till it was, till the mass. I mean from midnight you could eat um, you talk fast before receiving, well that was for midnight. If you were fasting as a day of fast, well it was all

day. And you could only have one full meal in the day. Personally I never could fast because my health didn't permit it. So I had to do other things that ah, to prevent, to take the place of fasting.

S: What customs did you have at Christmas?

I: At Christmas? Well we exchanged gifts. As long as you believed in father, in the ah, in Santa Claus, which I still do. In the sense that um, I think that, you know, something good comes to you and you don't expect it. When we exchanged gifts we had a Christmas tree. And as a child that's one of the most wonderful memories I have of opening the doors to the parlor and walking into the Christmas tree. It seemed as though it was fairyland. I don't think it was that extraordinary now, but at that time it certainly was. I mean the lights and the um, especially the year when of course I was under ten and we had, my father had made a carousel all made out of plywood. And of course it seemed to be the most gorgeous thing in the world. It was painted, one little basket was green and one little basket was red. And one of my aunts, the one that I told you before was the milliner, she had little celluloid dolls. They don't have them anymore, but they had little celluloid dolls. And one was dressed as a little man and the other one was dressed as a little woman. And there was little dolls sitting on each, two dolls sitting on each little ah, basket. And it didn't make any music but you cranked it and the baskets went around. It was really a beautiful thing. Then another year, well I got a set of dishes. And ah, there was things that could be shared with my sister and I. There was only the two of us. What we got as personal gifts, I don't remember, because those things were for both of us. (S: Umhm.) And um, another year there was some kind of a rocking thing made out of wood again. My father was very handy with his hands. So he made a lot of things for us.

S: So some of your toys were handmade then?

I: Oh yes. Some of our toys . . . Well I guess that was (--)

S: Was most of it handmade? Most of your toys handmade?

I: Most of it was handmade, except, well some things were bought, like a set of dishes. That had to be bought. (S: Umhm.) The little china closet that they were in, was handmade, but by an uncle, not by my father, but by an uncle.

S: Do you still have these homemade toys?

I: I don't have any of the toys except the china closet. The little china closet, it's in my attic. (S: Umhm.) And ah, I still have the dishes though. And um, it was . . . And even as you grew older and in the years that we were in Hudson, where there wasn't, we didn't have too much money to spend because we couldn't, we couldn't go out to work. It was a little farm country, there was no place to work. We handmade things for my mother. I think it was just the spirit that was there. That's probably why I say I still believe in Santa Claus. (S: Umhm.) No, it was a very beautiful . . . It was a beautiful holidays, it was,

there was joy in the preparations. (S: Um hm.) So that, that probably accounts for the fact that we enjoyed, no matter how tired you were on Christmas day you had all the enjoyment of getting it prepared before, you know?

S: Do you think they had the same customs in Canada?

I: Oh yes. That's where it came from.

S: They had the tree and Santa Claus there?

I: Yes, I would believe. No. In Canada he's not called Santa Claus. He's called Pere Noel. (S: Uh huh.) And he comes to visit and he's, he brings good things to good boys and girls. He brings coals to the ones that haven't been so good, which I don't think he did anyway. I think he brought everybody something good. (S: Um hm.) And um, I mean . . .

S: But the New Years custom is definitely from Canada?

I: It's definitely from Canada. And um, we ahs not only . . . I've talked about the religious part there, but also the social aspect of it was you went visiting on New Years Day. (S: Umhm.) You went, you know you were just expected to go visit your relatives. (S: Umhm.) And it was um . . . In those days I think the French, I don't know about other nationalities, I know the French was very conscious of seniority. You know, you respected your elders. The oldest brothers and the oldest sisters. You know, I mean there was a certain amount of respect. It wasn't imposed, it just was, that's it. (S: Umhm.) You knows that's the way you acted.

S: Were you an older sister? The oldest sister?

I: I was the oldest sister. I'm not the oldest child, as I found out it one of my courses I took a few years back. I am not the oldest child [Laughs], but I'm the oldest one living. (S: I see.) Let's put it that way. No, the same customs more or less held along the line. It's dying out, but you overlook it. It doesn't make that much difference. (S: Um hm.) But um, as long as my parents lived, we had New Years here. When my sister started having children, she started having Christmas at her house (S: Um hm.) because it was easier. (S: Um hm.) And, but New Years was still over here. That custom of their coming here for Christmas, for New Years dropped after my parents passed away, because of the fact that they don't observe New Years that much. (S: Umhm.) And her husband . . .

S: Oh, they don't observe it the way you use to?

I: Not the way, no. Not the way that I do at all, at all, at all, because of the existencies of work. I mean, my brother-in-law happens to be in a business that they have to work on New Years Day. So that, that kind of spoils . . . (S: Umhm.) And after my parents were gone, there was really no need to keep it, this the family home.

S: Where does your brother-in-law work?

I: He works in ah, he's ah, he goes to the package store.

S: Oh, he has his own?

I: Own business. And ah, but, I have kept this New Years business now . . . I have relatives over on New Years Day. And we have a big dinner on New Years Day.

S: Does your sister come?

I: No. She hasn't been able to come. But um, my relatives, all the Desmarais' come.

S: Now, do their children ask the blessing of their father?

I: No.

S: They don't keep that custom anymore?

I: No. No. They're not, her father isn't French.

S: Oh, I see.

I: I guess they pulled away from it. It has to be a joint venture. (S: Umhm.) My parents, my father and mother both had asked it of their parents and they were very convinced that it was the thing to do. And they passed it onto us. And ah, but I still think it's a beautiful . . . Well, it was another thing that was very nice, too. If you had a priest who came to visit, before he leaves, you ask him to bless the house (S: Um hm.) for the year. (S: Um hm.) You know, of course it's hard now. But sometimes you had a priest that was . . . We have a priest in our family, Father Leo Desmarais. He's an Oblate and he comes on New Years Day and before, of course, he does bless the table, but before he goes I ask him for his blessing. I think it's something that helps.

S: Is it an honor to have a religious person in the family, like a priest, or a sister, or a brother?

I: I... Well I think it is. It's ah . . .

S: Does the family feel that way?

I: I think that at one time the families felt much stronger, very strongly about that. But um, I think that no matter what the profession, you should accept people for what they are. But, yes, I do feel that at one time, people felt a very great deal of pride to have a priest in their family.

S: Did they try to get one person in the family to go into the religious orders?

I: I don't think they tried to get them to go in, but they certainly didn't stand in their ways if they wanted to go.

S: They encouraged them.

I: They encouraged them. Oh yes. They even would sacrifice to send them (S: Umhm) if they felt that they had the calling, you know. So.

S: Umhm. Now how many religious orders do we have here in Lowell? We have the hospital, for instance.

I: We have the hospital. We have the, well the parish of course. We have the Franco-American School. We have the, well at one time St. Joseph's School was run by religious. I understand now that they have a lay principal and they have lay teachers. Maybe just a few religious teaching over there. But that stands to reason, I mean vocations are falling down on everywhere. So that's not more ah . . .

S: How about the nursing homes?

I: Oh, they gave a list of the nursing homes. There aren't too many people, except, of our parish here in nursing homes right now. Except at D'Youville. But that D'Youville, that's open to all parishes. So it doesn't make too much difference. (S: Umhm.) And um,

S: But um, are these sisters from one order? Are they all from the same order?

I: Yes.

S: They all come from Canada?

I: Yes, they come from Ottawa.

S: All from Ottawa?

I: Yah, the sisters

S: What order is that?

I: Soeurs Grise de la Croix d'Ottawa.

S: That's all of it, from the same order?

I: That's the hospital, and D'Youville Manor.

Tape II, side A ends
Tape II, side B begins

S: ...B tape, continuing the interview with Irene Desmarais at her home. Now Irene, tell me about speaking French with, where there are other people around? Did you find any problems?

I: Well at one time that was a real no-no, because it was considered as if you were speaking French in an environment where people did not understand what you were saying. It was ignorant. Now personally I really don't feel that way about it, because if you were French from France, and you happen to speak French, people would think that it's a sign of culture. I mean you come from a different country. Whereas, if you've lived in this country all along and you're speaking French in an English speaking environment, well it's not right. It's not polite. Well I grant you it probably isn't polite, but I don't really see any harm in it. (S: Umhm.) Because nowadays all languages are spoken in public and it doesn't seem to make any difference. And that's one thing I've got to bring about. Up until 1976 when we celebrated the anniversary of the United States, we were...they were trying to melt us down into one big pot. And at that time they seemed to recognize that every ethnic group had something to contribute to the United States. And I was personally very happy about this change of attitude, because I think that instead of trying to completely obliterate, or squash our own individualities, it's good to bring them out and recognize them for what they are. Some, at one time, it was a conflict perhaps more in individual instances. That people would not want their children to speak French, because they'd be afraid that they would speak it with an accent. That perhaps does exist with other nationalities too. They wouldn't want their children to speak English with a Greek accent or Polish accent, which is something you can't help anyway. But um, that's a minor thing. Going on from this to people who have helped the French. There's some clubs. There is The Jeanne Mance here in Lowell, which was, it still is I guess, considered a group of people who gathered together. And our constitution reads that it's for the advancement, the cultural, social and religious advancement of people of our own descent. It is a little select in the sense that you have to be of French descent. Regardless if you're 1/4 French or 1/8 French or 1/16 French, as long as you have French blood in you, you may be accepted in the club. You have to speak French because the order of the day is conducted in French. And we have social gatherings. We collect money for charities, mostly the different schools in the city, to encourage the study of French. And we have our fairs, Christmas fairs. And we popularize the French dishes. And not only French dishes, but French Canadian dishes, to keep up the culture of what we are. Um, I'm very proud of being French, but I'm also very very proud of being French Canadian extraction. First of all, I'm an American. That's the first thing I want to make clear, but my Canadian forebearers were in Canada since the 1600's on both sides of the family. So that they helped to develop that country, and then they came to the United States in the 1800's. So that I'm proud of that heritage too. As far as the club is concerned, going back to the club, it used to have, it was founded by about seven or eight people that got together for that purpose. And um, as I say they encouraged.

S: Now these people who got together to found the club, were they the educated people?

I: They were, yes I would say. It was Mrs. Routsier, Mrs. Beaulieu, um, [unclear], um, forget her name. Yes they were, they were. And they, I guess they felt there was a need to (--)

S: They wanted to perpetuate the French?

I: Perpetuate the French language.

S: Language and culture?

I: Right.

S: Umhm.

I: At that time there were about three different clubs in Lowell that had more or less the . . . L'Association du Chatrist. There was another Club too. I forget the name, but they more or less all had the same desire. You know? (S: Umhm) And um, they . . .

S: Now does everybody in the community have the same urge to perpetuate the culture and the language? Do you feel that they all want it, or is it just a select few?

I: I think, I would think it's more a select few.

S: Umhm.

I: I mean the younger generation doesn't care one way or the other. I think they find that if they had learned French it would be to their advantage, but you know, I mean why bother now, it's too late. But I think they still keep to certain traditions (S: Umhm) of the French, but um, they don't think it's an essential you know.

S: You mentioned the French food that you perpetuate the (--) (I: Umhm) What other foods are there besides pork pies?

I: There's pork pies. There's ragout. There's um (--)

S: Ragout is what?

I: Ragout was ah, oh it's meatballs, usually cooked in a sauce, and you add vegetables to it. And there's many ways of doing it. (S: Umhm.) You can do it with parts of ah, what do they call it, pork butts, I guess. There's other things too that um, I um, I do is crepes. There's French-Canadian crepes. These are the very, crepes that are very inexpensive to make. It was the standby of our families. When people were very poor, you know if you ate them you weren't hungry till the next meal. (S: Umhm) And um, it's a very popular thing to have at the fairs. It takes a little bit of time to make, but people seem to enjoy them. And not only that, but it brings back nostalgic memories of when their mothers

made them and when they gathered around the table. You know, so it's really pleasant to have these things around.

S: Were these crepes stuffed or just plain?

I: No, these were not the stuffed. These are the plain. It's a very basic recipe of a handful of flour, pinch of salt, an egg or two, and milk to consistency. Once you've beaten up everything together you can't add anymore flour. They're cooked in, they're fried in fat, not Crisco, the deep fat. Not deep, but fat in the pan. And they come all crinkly around like lace. And they're um. . . You eat them with maple syrup, or maple sugar, or um, some kind of mixture that my mother used to put together, brown sugar and cream. And at the time that she put it together, the cream rose to the top of the milk. You know it came, milk came in bottles. So she used to cream the milk and we'd drink the blue milk [unclear] we'd have that mixture with the ah . . . Now when I make them, I guess that's the only luxury in making them, because I have to buy the cream to make them.

S: Tell me about when they delivered the milk in the winter? What happened to the milk?

I: Oh well, if you didn't take the milk in, it would ice to the top and the cream would fall off [Laughs]. But ah . . .

S: It would freeze?

I: It would freeze and it come up like a little cone. Gee, I haven't thought about . . .

S: They were bottles then?

I: I haven't thought about that in years! [Laughs] We used to have a milkman then.

S: Did you have any other things delivered to the house?

I: Yes, we used to have a milkman. And there was a grocery man. And I guess there was a peddler that used to come around to sell the fruit. We used to buy our meats from the butcher. I mean, which was a special market.

S: No supermarkets?

I: Not the supermarket.

S: Was there a supermarket there?

I: There was one supermarket. What you might consider the supermarket was Vigeant's downtown, near um . . .

S: The Square?

I: No, not down the square, um . . .

S: Cabot Street?

I: Cabot, no. Where Captain Chris is? Somewhere around there. (S: Umhm.) Well I think that's right in that corner.

S: On Merrimack Street?

I: Yah, it was the corner of Merrimack Street and the canal.

S: Umhm.

I: That was the biggest market in Lowell, and um, as far as French were concerned. There were others later on, but ah, that was the biggest market when I was growing up.

S: How about the Rochette's beans? They were sold [unclear].

I: Rochette's. Oh yes, they were very very good. They still are. I mean, I understand that the recipe has been passed down to other, the franchise or whatever you call it. Yes, they're still very good. But (--)

S: What do you know about Mr. Rochette? Anything?

I: Nothing. I don't know the Rochettes at all.

S: Okay.

I: Because we made our own beans. My mother made her beans on Saturday. And it took all day to make them, but we had them on Saturday night. And hers were much darker than Rochette's beans. I think she added more molasses. (S: Umhm) That's not a very traditional, even though it's Boston Baked Beans. It was a very traditional meal in Canadian homes, beans and ham, and it was the ham shoulder. (S: Umhm) As a matter of fact, I have one in my frigidaire now that I cooked this week. And ah, it was another very good meal. Even though I don't think they're really French, but they were eaten in French Canadian homes, was a boiled dinner. (S: Umhm) Now we had a boiled dinner with spare-ribs, or ham. (S: Umhm.) Not with um (S: Corned beef?) corn beef. No. And we made our pea soup with salt pork, not with the ham bone.

S: How about onion soup? That wasn't traditional?

I: My mother didn't make onion soup. My mother made all soups under the sun except onion soup I guess. She made

S: Excuse me. Did you have a soup at every meal?

I: Oh yes!. Not at every meal, but we had a soup at . . . We had to have a soup every day. My father was a soup eater.

S: Is that traditional in the Canadian-French people?

I: I think son, because I think in the soup, you see you, there's substance. I mean you had your broth and you had your fat, what you needed. And the soups were not very, they were heavy. They were, if it was a vegetable soup there were vegetables in it.

S: Umhm.

I: And if it was . . . My mother used barley to thicken her soups. (S: Umhm.) We had rice soups. And we had, she made a wonderful chowder. And um, we had pea soup. We had . . . And of course we used the soup bone in those days, you know. And um . . .

S: And how much would you pay for the soup bones?

I: Five cents.

S: Umhm.

I: [Laughs] You can't get them now. They're as expensive as that kind of meat, but um, no, we had that and um.

S: Do they keep that tradition now, having soup in the homes, in the French Canadian homes that you know of today?

I: In the French Canadian homes? Yes, they do. Not every day, but they have the soup. And they um . . . We always had soup to start off the meal. And then there was bread, meat, and potatoes, and vegetables, which would comprise carrots, and turnip, and cabbage, probably. Not at the same meal, but I mean, at different times. We used very little can goods, because everything that was canned was put up in the fall. So that there were no can goods as such, like peas, or (--) (S: Umhm.) My mother canned her own tomatoes. (S: Umhm.) I still do.

S: Do you grow your own tomatoes now?

I: Sometimes, yes. (S: Umhm.) That's why I have to can them, because otherwise they'd go to waste. But um, we used to make our own piccalilli. Well there again it's because you had the tomatoes and the um . . . Before the frost you'd gather in your green tomatoes and you'd make your piccallili. (S: Umhm.) My mother made jelly. I haven't made jelly in a long time, but she made apple jelly. (S: Umhm.) And of course we had the apple sauce, (S: Umhm) which we also ate with those crepes, which was very good with the crepes. And um, I don't recall anything else. But ah, that's about it.

S: Well that sounds good. Can you tell me about mourning? If one person died in the family how did you mourn that person?

I: Um.

S: Did the family wear black?

I: As far, as long as there was a member of the family living. Now if the father died, I don't know if this is true in all families, and now everybody is gone away from black. But if the person remaining was inclined to want the mourning in black, you would do it. To um . . . actually mourning . . .

S: It wasn't, it wasn't a tradition to wear black?

I: Oh years ago it was a tradition. (S: I see) Years ago it was a tradition. As a matter of fact, when I was about three years old I was consecrated to the Blessed Virgin. And I was . . . My mother promised to let me wear only blue, white and blue till I was ten, with the exception that if there was a deaths I would be allowed to wear black. (S: Umhm) Thank God there wasn't any, so I didn't have to. Or if I went to school and the uniform was black. This did happen and I wore black. But yes, in those . . . years ago, about fifty years ago, it was very strict tradition to wear black. And then you went from black to gray to, and gray to (--)

S: Did the men wear black arm bands?

I: Not that I know of. (S: Umhm.) The men in my family never did that I know of. They wore a suit, a dark suit and a dark tie. (S: Umhm.) But um, and there was no music. I mean of course you didn't have the radios and TV's that we have today. But there was no music maybe for the first month or so. And after that, well it got relaxed a little bit. People didn't go out socially.

S: If you received a letter from Canada that somebody has died, did you ever receive any letters like that? [Unclear]

I: There was nobody that close to us in Canada.

S: Okay. I just wondered if they indicated in any way that it was mourning on the envelopes.

I: Oh yes. The envelopes would be black bordered.

S: Uh huh, they would be.

I: Yes, they would be black bordered. But um, as I say, we didn't have enough relatives in Canada.

S: Umhm.

I: They just all came to the United States. But within the United States I remember a cousin dying and we went to the funeral. And we had to wear . . . We wore a dark coat. (S: Um hm.) And there was no colors at all. Even the children wore dark clothes, but that custom has died out an awful lot. And I think it's good, because I know when my father died my mother wouldn't, didn't want us to go in. I went in to black dress. (S: Uhhuh.) But we didn't retain all the black for months, and months, and months. I think it was out of consideration. Where you worked, you don't have to impose your own sorrow to everybody. So it didn't. You know your sorrow was inside,

S: Now was a widow allowed to go out to dances, or for some good times?

I: No.

S: She was not allowed to go out?

I: No, she would not have been allowed to go out to dances, or to a good time.

S: With her family? If she went with her family somewhere?

I: Oh she could go with her family somewhere. That was alright.

S: If it was a social event she could go with her family?

I: As far as I know I think it was.

S: Would your mother have gone to a dance if you girls wanted to go to a dance, for instance?

I: No.

S: After your father died?

I: You mean to accompany us?

S: Yes, [Unclear].

I: We wouldn't have gone anyway.

S: I see.

I: No, we wouldn't have gone,

S: Because you weren't allowed to go?

I: It's not that we weren't allowed, it's just that we wouldn't have gone.

S: I see.

I: We just didn't, we wouldn't have felt right to go out that way.

S: Because your father had died?

I: Yah.

S: I see. Now you never married?

I: I never married.

S: Was that for any religious reasons?

I: No.

S: You said you were consecrated to the Virgin Mary?

I: Oh yah, but that had nothing to do . . . I t was just consecration that ah, I think it was just an act of devotion to the Blessed Mother that I would wear white and blue. And that was only for the ten, until I was ten years old. (S: I see) No, I had nothing, my not marrying had nothing to do with that.

S: Did you stay single to take care of your parents, because somebody [unclear]?

I: I just happened to be the one that was home to take care of them, and then I did. (S: Yah, that's) And no, I don't ah . . .

S: That's what happens sometimes to children. And I know it happens frequently in Irish families. Does that happen in French families?

I: It happens in French families too, sure.

S: One of the children will stay single to take care of the parents?

I: Yah, but that's not the reason why I stayed single.

S: Oh, I see.

I: Because my mother would have been very, very happy if I had met someone and got married. I just never happened to meet anyone.

S: Oh, I just thought that you had that reason of taking care of your parents.

I: No.

S: There's some, I know Irish people do that, and Greek people do that.

I: I think French people do it too, but in my case that wasn't the reason why I stayed single. I happened to be the one that was at home. (S: Umhm.) And I stayed till after my father died. And then I stayed on with my mother, and my mother died. And I hadn't found anyone that I cared enough about, so I never got married.

S: Oh, I was just trying to see if it was an ethnic tradition.

I: No, no.

S: No, it wasn't. You remained single. But it does happen.

I: It does happen. That's right, it does happen, but not in my case. (S: Umhm.) And not in the case of my father either, because his father had died, and my aunt was single, but she just happened to be single. She didn't marry. But all the brothers help to take care of my grandmother, you know.

S: Umhm. Oh the families do take care of the older people?

I: Oh!

S: The parents?

I: We used to, I don't know if they do now.

S: Oh they don't now as much as they used to?

I: I don't think they do now.

S: But it was a tradition to take care of the parents?

I: Yes, yes definitely.

S: And do you think that is changing now?

I: I do.

S: Do you think they're putting them in nursing homes, because the nursing homes are there, or why? Why is it changing?

I: Well I think that the first thing is that they don't have the rooms in their own homes. (S: Umhm.) I mean, homes are built smaller.

S: Okay, that's (unclear).

I: And they can't possibly have them, you know.

S: Yah. you have a big house here?

I: I have a big house, but I rent the upstairs.

S: Oh, it's a two-family house?

I: It's a two family, and it's always been. As far as I can, as far as I remember it, as far as I've been told. They must have made it into a two-family as soon as they bought it, (S: Um hm.) because it's always been somebody living down here and somebody living upstairs.

S: And was there always a French family living in the other apartment?

I: Ah, no not necessarily, because when I started to rent I didn't care if they were French, or whatever they were. As long as they were the kind of people I wanted up there. (S: Umhm.) By the way, I rent to young people usually who just got married. And they can stay there as long as they want, until they have . . . They can stay there and have children. And stay as long as the code will cover it, it covers five people up there. So they could have three children. It doesn't make any difference to me. (S: Umhm) Most of my tenants have been by word of mouth. I mean, one tenant leaves and they tell me they're very sorry to leave, but they have, they bought a house, but would I consider their friend. Their friend comes to see me. If they're acceptable, I take them. And for the last five tenants, that's the way it's been.

S: Well, because it's by word of mouth would it be French Canadians that would be referred to you?

I: No, no.

S: No. But when your parents had it, they would have French Canadians in there?

I: No. You see, that's why it was odd. When my parents had it, my father and mother lived downstairs, my grandmother lived upstairs. And we moved to Hudson in 1926, because my grandmother was paralyzed, we couldn't rent it to strangers. So my uncle came to live with his family of six, and his sister-in-law. And they, we have two rooms in the attic that are habitable, they're finished. So they came and they took this apartment plus the two rooms upstairs. So that someone was here to take care of my grandmother. When they moved out because we wanted to come back to Lowell, they moved out and we took the downstairs apartment again.

S: Umhm.

I: So that there was always, as far as when my grandmother, when my grandmother was alive it was always family that was living there.

S: So you people took care of the grandmother, and you took care of your mother. (I: Yes.) Two generations.

I: Right.

S: Now do you think the next generation, your sister's children, will they take care of her do you think?

I: I have a feeling they will.

S: Umhm.

I: I have a feeling they will. I have a feeling that, I think that if they didn't it would be her decision. That she would want to go into a home. And as long as, as far as I know, as long as she'll be able to carry herself around they'll be someone to stay with her, or be with her anyway, you know.

S: Umhm. Now you feel comfortable talking French, don't you?

I: Yes.

S: Do you feel more comfortable with French or English, because your English is perfect. So which way do you feel more comfortable?

I: It all depends what I'm talking about.

S: I see.

I: You know?

S: It depends on the subject then?

I: That's right.

S: Yah. All right. Now what do you mean? It has to be a French subject, or is it because of the people?

I: The people. If the people are French, and they want to talk French, I feel comfortable talking French with them.

S: So, if you're talking French somewhere, on a bus or someplace of that type, does anybody make any comments?

I: I don't anymore.

S: Oh, but you used to?

I: Well, I say I don't. If I were, I'd probably talk so low that the people next to me or behind me wouldn't be offended.

S: Umhm. Now do you have anybody that ever told you don't speak in French?

I: Yes I did. I did have someone. We went to... I was taking this girl to a doctor's office and we sat next to each other, and I said something to her. She said, "Don't talk French." So I didn't, but um, I don't think that there is any harm in it, really.

S: Were there any other people in the room?

I: There was some people in the room. I don't know whether they spoke French or not, (S: I see) but we weren't talking about them. We were just, I just happened to make a remark, you know. (S: Umhm) But I don't feel that conscious about speaking French in an English speaking environment.

S: But she did?

I: She did, yah.

S: Umhm.

I: Yah.

S: Do you know any other conflicts in French Canadian, French ah... How... the French Canadians and the Canadians, the ones that live in Canada and the ones that are here, is there any conflict between them? When they go there do they show off the American... show off...?

I: No, I don't think so. I don't think so. I think the only conflict there is, is that sometimes the children don't speak French. So that if the Canadians do speak French, it kind of um... Especially if they're from the Province of Quebec, where French is spoken much more extensively. And if the children don't speak French, well they feel a little bit funny about not speaking French, but outside of that, I don't think there's a... I think there was more of a conflict between the French here and the French in France. Some of the French of France um, I have the feeling sometimes that they look down on Canadian French. But I think it's because they don't realize that we've kept our French all these centuries and with very little help.

S: Why do you think they look down on Canadian French? Is it because of the language they speak? Is it different?

I: They claim it's a little different, but um . . .

S: Umhm. Is it also because Canada was a colony and they looked down of Colonists?

I: No, I don't think it's . . . I know . . . No, I don't think so. I think that they um . . . If it was a Canadian from Canada they probably wouldn't think anything of it. But a Canadian from the United States, I guess they think it's odd that we have kept our language. But they don't really look down on us. I mean I guess they probably think that some of our expressions are odd, but that's because we have kept the language without the benefit of changing it through the centuries, you know.

S: Umhm.

I: So that yes, our expressions may be a little different. (S: Umhm.) We have different ways of saying things than they do. But I guess when they get to know us better, they realize that we have accomplished something in keeping the French at all, (S: Umhm) in spite of all the circumstances, you know.

S: Do you know of French coming from France? Do they mix with the Canadian French? There aren't that many in Lowell, I don't think, from France?

I: No, I don't think . . . I think that they would kind of stick to their own. I think they would kind of stick to their own. (Repeats) I mean

S: Because the language is the same, but their culture is a little different?

I: Well, I don't think that they realize that they would have anything in common with the Canadian French.

S: Okay. Then their experiences are different then?

I: Their experiences are different.

S: Yah, they would have to be different.

I: Right, right.

S: But now when you were growing up were you allowed to go to a protestant church, even to visit.

I: Definitely not, I mean it was a no no.

S: All right, who said?

I: Oh, I don't know. That was absolutely out of the question. I think it's the same thing as the Protestants weren't allowed to go to a Catholic church. (S: Umhm) I have, oh, I'm glad you brought that up, because I belong to the Conference of Churches and the Christian Women United. And I was introduced to the Conference by a Father Duberge who was a Pastor at Ste Jean Baptiste at one time, and I went as a delegate. Even though that's thirteen years ago, I maintained a relationship with the Conference. I always, I managed to stay with the Senate, or whatever the governing, the Cabinet they called it, not the Senate. The governing body was, (S: Umhm.) because of the... And I found out that their reactions towards another denomination was the same as the Catholic denominative feeling. So that no, I um, personally I never could see why it existed, but (S: Um hm.) I was not liberated enough to take advantage of it. [Laughs] And now that I am, I find that there's wonderful people in all denominations. (S: Umhm)

S: What do you think, it's the priest that keeps us from going to another religion? I don't mean changing to another religion, but say, visiting a Protestant church for instance?

I: I don't think they have anything to say about it now. I means if you want to go to a Protestant church, you just go. I mean I wouldn't go for the service and say that it's going to count for my Mass. No. (S: Um) But I meant I have no qualms of conscience about going to a Protestant church. If some of my friends are being ordained in that church, for instance, (S: Um.) or if they're having a weekend supper, oh that's another thing. We never, we thought we shouldn't encourage the Protestants in their news. Well they're doing charitable work the same as we are. (S: Umhm.) So I don't see any difference in doing . . .

Interview ends